

Growing vineyards



This young three-acre vineyard along Beechland Road took off last summer as a part of a new farming venture called Simple Pleasures. James Hatchett expects his first harvest this fall with yields of one ton per acre.

Farmers look to the past for 'new' crop

By James Roberts
Springfield Sun

History is repeating itself.

Before prohibition put the stranglehold on wineries, Kentucky was the third largest producer of grapes in the union.

According to Census statistics, 13,600 gallons of wine was produced in Boyle, Logan and Washington counties in 1860.

When prohibition was introduced in 1920, Kentucky's grape growers hit a brick wall.

With no way to sell their grapes, growers started to look for alternative crops. Soon after, tobacco, corn and alfalfa fields started popping up.

A century later, tobacco, once the king of Kentucky's crops, is fading fast and farmers are once again looking for a new crop so they can pay their bills. They've found grapes.

"The idea of growing grapes in Kentucky is not a new idea," Rick Greenwell, Washington County Agricultural Extension Agent, said. "It's only new to this generation."

Vineyards and wineries are popping up in the northern, southwestern and central regions of the state - the same areas where they appeared before prohibition. These regions are more conducive to grape-growing, Greenwell said.

Tobacco settlement money, known as Phase I, directed toward farm diversification helped to start the resurgence of grapes and wineries in Kentucky.

Washington County is part of the Lincoln Trail Farm Winery Association, along with Marion and Nelson counties. The association was formed in December 2001.

Six farm vineyards or wineries will be located in Washington County and two each in Nelson and Marion.

It's all a part of a "wine trail," Greenwell said.

"Grapes and wineries are the only thing I've ever seen [in which] more is better," he said.

A market study showed that couples would come to a "wine region" and stay at a bed and breakfast, buy wine and a locally made craft and eat two meals in local restaurants.

"The wineries will be an asset to Washington County because of the tourists they will attract," said James Hatchett, who, along with his wife Sherry, have started Simple Pleasures on Beechland Road. Hatchett said he'll have his first harvest this fall and hopes for about one ton per acre.

The Hatchetts have three acres of grapes. Those grapes will be contracted out to Equus Run in

Midway. Hatchett plans to make his own wine, but that is a few years down the road.

The Lincoln Trail region will become a home to the boutique winery, Greenwell said. These types of wineries will not be able to compete against those in California. Instead, they'll carve out a niche, such as country wines - berry-flavored wines. Boutique wineries typically sell about 5,000 cases of wine annually.

The Lincoln Trail wineries will likely feature tasting rooms and gift shops stocked with locally made crafts. A Lincoln Trail Farm Winery Association press release states that all 10 wineries should be fully operational within five years.

'Going to be huge'

Vineyards grow the grapes and wineries make the wine. Although the two rely completely on the other, the two don't necessarily go hand-in-hand.

Greenwell said some wineries have their own vineyard while others have just enough vines for ambiance. Those wineries will buy about 95 percent of the grapes.

"The best scenario is that we would have both here," Greenwell said. "Often the money is in the wine, although there is good money in grapes."

Although there are about half a dozen vineyards here, all but one are waiting for a precinct election which will grant or deny permission to open a winery. In May 2001, 93 out of 117 voters gave permission for Donnie and Ronnie Coulter to sell wine at their Rolling Hills Vineyard.

Greenwell said the Coulters are making wine now.

The others must wait for the special election, which is likely to come before the May primary.

"It is our intention to develop wineries in the tri-county area that will absorb current production and provide additional market demand so that local wine grapes can become a major agricultural crop,"

Eric Ringo, co-owner of Long Lick Farm Winery, said.

Ringo asks those who are interested in growing grapes to contact the Washington County Extension Office at 336-7741.

The Lincoln Trail Farm Winery Association estimates that about 150-375 acres of grapes will be required to supply the wineries. Grapes typically sale for \$1,600 per ton.

There are three levels of grapes. The highest quality grapes, called vinifera, are used to make wine. Mid-level grapes, called French hybrids, are often blended with other grapes to make wine. The native-American grapes, such as concord, are the lowest grade of grapes. These are used to make juices.

If voters approve the wineries, Greenwell said that doesn't "open the door for others. This in no way gives others the right to [open a winery]. Each winery stands on its own."

If approved, some wineries could be in operation by the fall, Greenwell said.

The income from vineyards/wineries stands "head and shoulders above tobacco," Greenwell said. "If we pull this off with some high quality wines, it's going to be huge. The whole county will benefit.

The whole Central Kentucky region will benefit."

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